DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 189 611 CS 205 691

AUTHOR Moran, Charles
TITLE Hanging Out the Shingle: The Writing Tutor.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeast Modern Language Association (Pittsburg, PA, 1977).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English: Higher Education: Individual Instruction: Teaching Methods: *Tutorial Programs: *Tutoring: *Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

The usefulness of teaching advanced composition in a writing tutorial program has been demonstrated at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst with students who have passed college freshman English and who feel they still need some work in their writing. Justification for using the tutorial method is based on the premise that a teacher cannot say anything useful about writing to a large group of writers. Generalities such as "simplify," "use strong verbs," and "be concise" often do harm to students for whom such instructions do not apply. Although no formal measurement has been taken of the program's success, the following informal observations have been made: over a period of six years, 14 of the 36 sections of advanced composition have moved to the tutorial method: faculty and students' comments have been positive: and tutorial sections are always over-full. The problems associated with a writing tutorial are that (1) the tutorial is expensive, (2) it makes bad teaching, as well as good, more effective, (3) it puts heavy demands on student writers, and (4) it does not incorporate reading, class discussion, peer evaluation, or any of the other techniques often suggested to motivate student writers. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED189611

Charles Moran

English Department
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Mass. 01003

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charles Moran

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

CS205691

Hanging Out the Shingle: The Writing Tutor

At the University of Massachusetts/Amherst, the well-publicized return to the "basics" has sent students by the hundreds into our advanced expository writing courses. I do not intend to deal in this article with the large questions that this phenomenon raises. What is "basic" is certainly not at all clear, nor is it clear that these basics, once defined, were ever dealt with in the good old days to which we are moved to return. My subject is the writing tutorial, one of our English Department's responses to this apparently sincere desire on the part of so many of our students to learn how to write.

This semester, the English Department at the University teaches thirty-six sections of Advanced Expository Writing. Fourteen of these sections are taught by tutorial: that is, the student writer does not meet in class with a teacher and twenty other students; the student instead meets the teacher in the teacher's office for one thirty-minute tutorial each week. During the tutorial, the teacher and student go over the writing done that week, the teacher suggests revisions, and the student goes off to revise the work and begin another project which will be read, discussed and revised the following week.

The writing tutorial can hardly be considered "new" or "experimental." In some respects, the writing tutorial is as old as the craft itself: an

editor sits down with a single writer and says what needs to be said about the piece of writing under consideration. Most teachers recognize the value of the individual conference, and most recognize that writing is a craft and can best be taught one-to-one, like the cello. Donald Murray argued years ago that the writing teacher should cut class entirely. But to my knowledge we have not done this yet, and to leave the classroom behind--to abandon the teacher-centered writing classroom and to become a writing "doctor," in a sense--that is, indeed, a new departure.

I'd first like to suggest that, even if the writing tutorial does not work, it should work, and for reasons that have to do with the dynamics of the teacher-centered classroom and with the nature of the process that is being taught. A teacher can not say anything useful about writing to a classroom filled with writers. There are sick writers, but no contagion, no plague, no wide-wasting pest against which writers can be mass-inoculated. This is certainly the case with writers in college who, by the time they arrive, have accumulated a stock of advice about good writing that is strange and various. The students in my section of Advanced Expository Writing this semester are the usual random lot: a Phys. Ed. major from the University, an English major from Smith, a film animator from Cambridge who commutes to Amherst on Wednesdays, a self-styled poet from Hampshire College, a native speaker of Korean, two exchange students from Sussex University in England. These seven are the extremes, I suppose, but the eleven more-or-less average students who make up the balance of my section are themselves a various crew: some write too much, some are blocked; some are too abstract, and some cannot generalize responsibly from specific material; some have written quite a lot during their lives, and some have written hardly anything; some need discipline and rage; some need all the

support they can get. And even as I define these categories, I realize that none of my students fits any of these boxes well or for very long. The blocked writer may begin to gush, and will then require a new prescription from the writing doctor.

Let us take three of my students, more or less at random. Jim K. makes my heart leap up every Monday morning at 10:30. He is the college teacher's dream: a poor boy who believes in education and is making it by pure grit--engaging, quiet, lacking skills and confidence but gradually acquiring both--from a poor family and a home without books. He submits an essay each week--four drafts, a great stack of paper. His problem is that he is so full of 'don'ts' that he is writing defensively. The drafts get progressively worse; his final draft is demonstrably worse than the first draft. He has been told, he tells me, to avoid the first person--which he has understood to mean that he must somehow leave himself out of his writing entirely. His drafts become progressively less personal, and as they lose voice they lose direction. The treatment for Jim K.: to attempt to convince him that his first-draft writing is good; to get him to write letters, directed prose, prose with voice and audience. At 11:00 Monday morning Vaughan F. appears. Vaughan is overwhelmingly verbal: 3000 words of typescript each week, an Englishman's view of America. Vaughan needs to be beaten up each week, to be told that his writing is facile and glib, which it is, and to have his easy generalizations shredded by a critical editor. At 11:30, Cheng Lee appears, eager for work. His writing problems have their source in the lack of fit between English and Korean: we work on the definite and indefinite article, because he has most trouble with this aspect of his writing on this day. What general statement about writing will be useful to these three writers? What advice can a teacher give to all

three? To thirty?

Let's try one of the good old bits of advice, one that I and apparently many of my students remember from our writing handbooks: "be specific; don't generalize." Note first that the advice is hoist with its own petard--"don't generalize" is a general statement about writing. But imagine this instruction given, and understood, by a roomful of writers. This instruction will improve those writers who tend not to support their general statements with specific evidence, perhaps; but what about the writer who is unable to generalize responsibly from specific materials? This writer will be driven further from the possibility of improvement. And insofar as the advice tells us to avoid the general statement, it is not widely useful, and it may even be dangerous. We must generalize. The transcripts of the Watergate tapes, Richard Ohmann has reminded us, reveal men whose only concern is the specific, men who apparently were unable to generalize.

Let's try another bit of advice, this one culled from countless handbooks: "use strong verbs." Now strong verbs are fine for strong-verb kinds of prose, but strong-verb prose is not what we always need. This bit of advice is perhaps more wrong than it is right. One of our writing students in a laboratory class at Springfield Technical High School described the Tech News room in an essay that was dull and colorless. Our student teachers agreed that the essay needed color, and that one achieved color most effectively by jazzing up the verbs. So the student writer dutifully jazzed up the verbs--and typewriters began to lurk, winds began to rattle the venetian blinds, the blackboard began to loom threateningly. Then we went to see the Tech News room. It was dull and colorless. The essay had been a triumph of imitative form. Strong verbs were simply not appropriate. What horrified us

was, first, our error, and second, our student's eagerness to obey our instructions.

I am reminded of Janet Emig's NCTE monograph, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. One of Emig's protocol students, the wonderful Lynn, said of her English teacher, "She was always telling us to be concise, and she loved Melville, who was anything but concise. So I guess I'm no Melville, so I'll have to make it concise." As Ms. Emig goes on to demonstrate, Lynn would lie--would say the thing that was not so--so that her writing would be concise. The teacher, speaking to a roomful of writers, feels the need to say something about writing. So the teacher does. "Be concise." Perhaps she has read William Zinsser's On Writing Well, chapter three: "Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds." And then Zinsser quotes Thoreau: "simplify, simplify." Whatever the source of the advice, and these sources are legion, the student first resists it, and protests--aloud or silently--"but Melville and Charlotte Brontë and John Updike and Nora Ephron and William Shakespeare and all those who pretend to wit, all those who enjoy the flow and surge of language, the feel of it on the tongue, the sound of it on the ear--these writers are not concise." The teacher responds, if the protest if voiced: "Ah, little person, you are not Nora Ephron, or William Shakespeare, or Charlotte Brontë, or Herman Melville. So you have to write concisely."

Janet Emig's Lynn dealt with the situation much as the natives will deal with the colonists--she went underground for the duration. With a student as strong as Lynn, the teacher will do no harm. Lynn can protect herself. But look now at the word we are using. Protect. Must students protect themselves from the teacher? The dynamics of the teacher-centered writing classroom will produce advice from teacher to students about writing

in general. There will be an inevitable lack of 'fit' between the advice given and the actual needs of particular students dealing with particular subjects. This lack of fit will be understood and dealt with by students as agile as Lynn; it will be accepted and internalized by the less-agile students, and will do harm to them as writers. I have hours and hours of taped tutorials in which students reveal the source of their pain: impacted bits of wisdom. "But I thought you should avoid the first person." "But I thought that an essay had to have an introduction." "But I thought you had to outline before you began to write." I don't want to blame the teacher here, or blame the student. The student is looking for a quick and easy route to good writing, and the teacher is forced by the situation to say something about writing to all those student writers in the classroom. What the teacher does say has often, in our experience, fallen on ground that was all too fertile, and attained exuberant and malignant growth.

The conception of composition as a subject to be taught seems increasingly to me to be dead wrong. We define composition as a subject by false analogy with, say, History, or Veterinary Science, or, more plausibly, Rhetoric. And since composition is a subject, it must have textbooks--and composition textbooks are even more dangerous than the stand-up composition teacher, for the teacher is giving advice to twenty or thirty students, whereas the handbook, if it is to make a profit for its authors and its publisher, must appear to give advice to tens of thousands. Its advice is therefore still more general and, if what I have said before this holds, more general is less accurate. The relatively short handbooks give the advice baldly; the better handbooks hang so many qualifiers on the advice they give that the advice practically disappears. "Vary sentence structure," the blunt advice, becomes in the more sophisticated and

expensive handbook, "use appropriate sentence structure," and the advice is followed by a chapter which glosses "appropriate." Peter Elbow begins his Writing Without Teachers with this delightful and sound preface: "Here you will find no descriptions of good and bad constructions, strong and weak sentences, correct and incorrect usages. When people try to tell me about good and bad writing it doesn't usually improve my writing at all; and when I tell other people it seldom improves their writing either. If you want a book to tell you the characteristics of good and bad writing, this is not it."

So I have made my case for my first point: that a teacher can not say anything useful about writing in general to large groups of writers. "But," you will say, "a teacher can say something useful about a particular student writer, and the other students in the room will apply what is said to their own writing, where appropriate." Which brings me to my second point: a writing teacher can not usefully talk about a particular student's writing to a roomful of writers. In the first place, as I have argued before, there are no common writing problems, and so the process of generalizing from the individual to the rest of the class should not take place. And in the second place, any advice given to a single writer will affect the other listeners in the classroom in ways that are probably harmful. Let me illustrate with a parable, which is also a true story. When I was in graduate school at Brown University, I coached Freshman crew. One sunny afternoon the boats were moving nicely on the fetid Seekonk River. I noticed that the bow man was slow with his hands on the recovery, relative to the other seven men in the boat and relative to the Platonic form I held in my mind's eye. So I called out through the megaphone, "Bill, get your hands out of your gut just a little faster." Fine. Bill moved his hands out faster. And so did the other seven men in the boat. Now I had

made myself a boat in which one man was rowing properly, and seven not. Vision of a World War I comic dessert plate from my childhood--the French sergeant shouting at this company, in which one man is clearly out of step, "Sale section! Il n'y a qu'un qui marche ensemble." I had made the boat worse with my instruction. After several experiences like this, I tried another strategy: I told the others not to listen when I adjusted one man's form. That did not work either. Finally I learned never to talk about form to a boat full of oarsmen, but to take individuals aside after practice and talk to them in private. The Freshman boat improved, and eventually won the big race on the Schuylkill.

Now the writing classroom is not the Seekonk River, but teaching college writing is like coaching crew in this: the people in the boat or in the classroom are individuals, and in very different ways depart from a norm. If you 'coach' one in public, somehow the others must be kept from reacting to what you say. If a boatful of oarsmen hears "get your hands out of your gut faster," most of them will do it. If a roomful of writers hears "simplify," most of them will do it. And the result will be to lower the level of performance of all those in the boat, in the room.

Does the tutorial work, however? Even if it should work, does it? The answer to this question seems for the moment to be a qualified yes, but whatever answer we make must be made in the context of studies like that of Jewell, Cowley, and Rhum (1969) who compared students taking Freshman English with those not, and found no significant difference between the writing of the two groups. Measurement is difficult in this field, because we have no received definition of "good writing" and can not therefore measure progress toward the good. Furthermore, as Mina

Shaughnessy suggested, the semester may be too short a period; perhaps measureable change takes place only over longer periods. Granted that our instruments, then, are imperfect. The instruments we have suggest that the writing tutorial has a definite place in the writing curriculum of the college or University.

A good measure of the tutorial's success or failure is the teachers' reaction to the new format. If we look at what the faculty do, rather than what they say, we find that they have voted with their feet. We gave the first tutorial writing class in 1974; today, fourteen of our thirty-six sections of advanced expository writing are taught by tutorial. The number of sections taught by tutorial increased slowly and gradually, despite the fact that the tutorial requires new teaching habits and a radically different working schedule.

If we look at what faculty say, we get a picture that is mixed. Charles Sides, a graduate student in our Department, is attempting to measure the success or failure of the tutorials and, although he has not completed his work, he has been kind enough to let me see what he has done so far. He finds that the teachers' positive comments are most frequently these: both teachers and students like the individual attention and personal contact; teachers enjoy the immediacy of the student response; teachers marvel at the <u>amount</u> of writing they and their students can deal with during a semester; and teachers feel that their students' morale stays remarkably high throughout the semester. I would add to these general observations my own. The tutorial is perhaps the only format in which the teacher can discover bits of impacted "advice" that have distorted the composing process and impaired the students' writing. Just this week, one of my students, Kathy P., told me what

I had suspected: that I was not seeing her writing, but her corrected writing, and the corrections had been performed by friends in the dormitory. She could not remember when it last was that she had submitted a piece of writing that was really hers. And that proved to be the reason Kathy's writing has been unfocussed, vague, voiceless. I hope there is time for her to learn that she must trust her own voice, her own perceptions, her own style. She is a senior, graduating this semester.

Again from my experience, the tutorial provides excitement in the chase, the search for the writer's problem. A particular student comes in with an essay that is imperfect in a particular way, and the teacher tries out an hypothesis: the writer needs to write to an audience. The teacher writes out a prescription based upon this diagnosis, and in the next week's tutorial discovers whether the diagnosis (and the resultant prescription) were appropriate or not. If so, Aha! Remarkable, my dear Watson. If not, the chase is still on. Finally, and again from my own experience, the writing tutorial gives the teacher a window on the creative process. I require my tutorial students to bring in all rough drafts and scratch work. Looking through this rough work, the teacher can follow the composing process, and if there seems to be a problem, adjust the process. A student who writes slowly may be given a prewriting or free-writing program to follow. Very often students feel they must think before they write--Warriners tells them so--and very often this sequence is not for them the most productive. Some students simply get lost in their drafts, and have to learn that they can and sometimes should outline the rough draft they have written before charging on to another draft. One of my present students, John, stares at blank paper for hours, and then writes his essay all in one burst, much like the Zen

master painter. I can't work that way, and I am moved to meddle with John's process, but clearly it works for him, so I force myself to keep hands off.

A second measure of the tutorial's success or failure is the students' response to the writing tutorial. Like the faculty, the students have voted with their feet, and our sections of writing tutorial are always over-full. We turn away students by the score, with real regret but with compassion for students already in the filled classes and, finally, with compassion for ourselves. Enough is enough, and nine hours of tutorials per week is all any of us seems able to take. Students tell each other about the writing tutorials. We do not advertise; on the contrary, our course descriptions are forbidding--and the students continue to come. They come, certainly, because Time and Newsweek tell them they should come, but they also come because they think they are learning something. Student evaluations of the writing tutorial are high--incredibly high in my case and in others--higher than our evaluations in other courses we teach.

A third measure ought to be measured improvement in student writing, and here I must plead sloth and incompetence: we have simply not made this measurement, and it seems distressingly clear that we should. I have been loath to undertake such a measurement for reasons already stated: the iffiness of the measurement process, the variables that can not be controlled. Budz and Grabar (1976) attempted to measure the difference between students who were tutored and students who were taught in classrooms, and the problems they encountered in procedures and methods have deterred me from making the attempt. Finally, however, we should begin to measure, even if the results we obtain prove nothing at all.

For now, we have this: that most of our students publish a peice during the semester: a letter to an editor, a book or movie review, a piece

in the college newspaper. Last semester one did a handbook for University students seeking foreign exchange scholarships; one did an article on the Springfield Fine Arts Center for Western Massachusetts, a glossy periodical that accepted his piece and then went bankrupt--a lesson in the dangers of the marketplace. In all of these cases, the student's writing has been validated by someone other than the teacher. Students in the writing tutorials also write essays for other courses. My rule is that if the essay is to count twice (for my course and for someone else's) there must be three times the work in it: two for me, one for the other teacher. When the student receives a high grade from an instructor who is not me, this tells me--and the student writer--that together we are on the right track.

There are a number of problems associated with the writing tutorial, and I do not for a moment mean to suggest that we should all stop what we have been doing and begin tutoring. The first, and today the most pressing, of these problems is that the tutorial is expensive. In my bones I believe that writing can only be taught by tutorial, and that any writing class other than a tutorial is a pointless and perhaps pleasant game. But a tutorial class must be small, and is therefore expensive. At the University of Massachusetts, eighteen students is a full advanced writing class, and if we use the tutorial, we can not go higher. Eighteen thirty minute tutorials is nine hours of tutorials each week, roughly what I would spend on a literature course or a stand-up writing course, when preparation and paper-grading time is counted. In the tutorial there is no preparation and no paper-grading time, so for the moment, the tutorial writing sections do not penalize the teacher. But clearly if the University were to teach all of its writing sections in this way the cost would be prohibitive, and the taxpayers would simply not foot the bill. On the other hand, although the cost is high, we believe the efficiency

of the method is high, and perhaps the cost effectiveness of the tutorial is greater than that of a large and ineffective course. Can you teach the cello to a room full of apprentice cellists? Music departments argue that their instructional loads must be light if they are to do their job at all. Perhaps English departments can make the same case.

A second problem is one that is more difficult to live with, for it dwells in that poisoned land called "How Other Teachers Teach." Charles Sides, the graduate student who is studying the tutorial, seems to be moving toward this conclusion: that the writing tutorial is a powerful format, one that makes good teaching more effective, and bad teaching more effective. Charles has discovered one student whose writing has grown progressively worse, apparently because, like Janet Emig's Lynn, he has been told to be more concise. The result of this advice has been progressively shorter and simpler sentences, shorter paragraphs, and, finally, shorter and duller essays. The problem here appears to be the teacher, and not the format: a teacher who is still giving general advice about writing, using the tutorial as an opportunity to deliver short lectures on good writing to an audience of one.

A third problem is that the tutorial puts heavy demands upon the student writers. They have to write on their own for seven or eight hours each week, without regular classes or quizzes or any of the regular machinery that they may require to perform at all. It is important that the students understand this at the outset, and we make our expectations as clear as we can with a written statement and a system that penalizes the students' failure to perform in a systematic and impersonal way. The writers who undertake the tutorial cannot be rank beginners, because the beginning

writer will need more frequent editorial advice. And from my own experience, the writing tutorial does not work well with the really polished and rapid writer. This writer might do better with the old-style grade and written critique. Perhaps the tutorial works best for the large middle range, those writers who can work on their own, but still need help.

Finally, there are many functions that the writing tutorial does not perform. It does not teach reading, or use reading as an adjunct to the student's writing. It does not set out to teach students logic or rhetoric or creative thinking in any systematic way. It does not call on the writer's peers for their judgment of the quality of the writer's work. If there is no one general truth that applies to my tutorial students, however, it is this: in their other courses they have read, they have discussed, they have listened to lectures--but they have written practically nothing either in their high school or college classes. Peter B. tells me that he does not remember writing in high school--at all. If we believe that writing is learned by writing, or at least that it cannot be learned in the absence of writing, then the writing tutorial fulfills a need.

To sum it all up, the writing tutorial works, within the limits I have described. It works for the students we are presently teaching: that is, students who have passed through the Freshman English program and who still feel they need some work on their writing. Our experience suggests that tutorials should not be required; that they should be offered at the upper levels; that they should not be promoted or turned into a program but discreetly advertised in course-description guides. The writing tutorial can perform a useful function at a college or university, and deserves a place in the writing curriculum of an institution of higher learning.